Overview of Pillar IV: Community Involvement and Benefits

Recognizing and Supporting Local Community Custodianship and Involvement in Rock Art

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Aspects of Agnew et al.'s (2015) Pillar IV focuses discussion in this presentation: “This pillar of rock art conservation emphasizes the need to encourage appropriate and well-managed economic, social and cultural development initiatives by and for Indigenous, local and regional communities. Genuine community involvement can result in greater awareness of rock art, increased economic opportunities and higher quality display and interpretation for visitors” (48).

The vision for Pillar IV incorporates the following:

• Economic, social, and cultural initiatives that use rock art heritage will be run by or in partnership with Traditional Owners or local communities and will return a fair benefit to them.
• Tourism to rock art sites will be fairly negotiated, carefully planned, and undertaken in partnership with Traditional Owners and local communities.
• Traditional Owners and local communities who benefit from rock art will appreciate the value of the sites in a contemporary world and in turn will become stronger protectors of their rock art heritage.
• The cultural and economic value of rock art sites will be considered prior to decisions being made about economic development that may affect rock art and its custodians.

Pillar IV: Principles

The principles underpinning this pillar are listed below.

• Recognition of the values and benefits of rock art in land use and tourism planning
• Community engagement in the development of initiatives and opportunities in tourism and research from their inception
• Fair trade principles for rock art in tourism and use of rock art and associated imagery
• Realistic expectations for tourism at rock art sites—no overselling of anticipated community benefits
• Training for and development of skills and experience that assist local communities in gaining greater benefit from rock art sites and that minimize impacts and maximize sustainable development
• A reasonable percentage of tourism benefits accruing to community and conservation outcomes
In this presentation, a new case study success story that is congruent with the vision and principles of Pillar IV is summarized along with a larger new program of collaborative research we are undertaking in two major research projects funded by the Australian Research Council (ARC) that began in 2016.

The first project, History Places, involves fieldwork between Traditional Owners and archaeologists to locate and record previously undocumented rock art sites in order to answer varied research questions, to develop a database for conservation and management purposes, and to enhance an emerging sustainable cultural heritage tourism business driven by the Traditional Owners of the Namundjdbuk Estate, Wellington Range, Northwest Arnhem Land, Australia (fig. 1).

Namundjdbuk lies in the center of the Wellington Range and extends from the coastal waters of the Arafura Sea south of South Goulburn Island to the tributaries of the King River farther south. To date, more than three hundred rock art sites have been documented (fig. 2). Senior Aboriginal Traditional Owner Ronald Lamilami not only supports intensive heritage research across the Namundjdbuk Estate but also is in the process of setting up a research and interpretation center with family and clan members at Waminari Bay, where they have established the Wilam campground (*Wilam* means “bark canoe” in the local Maung [Mawng] language). Lamilami refers to rock art sites as “history books” and to big complexes such as Djulirri (with more than three thousand paintings) as “libraries” that record all the experiences and encounters his ancestors had over time.

In the Wellington Range, pigs, termites, vandalism, mining exploration, and future tourism and development are the biggest risks to the rock art. Consequently, the History Places research project was designed to, among other things, develop a conservation and management model for use not only in this part of Arnhem Land but also nationally. A key research objective is to better understand chronological change in Wellington Range rock art and to record the contemporary cultural significance of rock art history places.
Fieldwork undertaken in June and July 2016 is summarized and key issues raised by Indigenous team members are identified. The archaeological team was the first paying client of Lamilami’s new sustainable tourism business. Besides participating in fieldwork, Traditional Owners were paid to provide food and to cook for the crew. They practiced their guiding skills on the archaeologists (figs. 3 and 4), and the team rented 4WD vehicles from the fledgling business. Traditional Owners also maintained the campgrounds and asked questions of the rock art researchers in order to add archaeological interpretation to their Indigenous experience so as to better inform future clients. Traditional Owners told us the best way to look after rock art from their perspective is through fire management, feral animal culling, vegetation monitoring, and managing access (fig. 5).
It is concluded that the success and longevity of sustainable tourism businesses involving rock art are dependent on start-up and some form of ongoing funding, a strong multi-skilled manager/coordinator, and scope for traditional cultural practices and obligations, as well as good marketing, communication skills, and commitment. It should also be cautioned that economic opportunity expectations may be unrealistic.

This case study sets the scene for a much larger new ARC Australian Laureate Fellowship project that focuses on rock art history, conservation, and Indigenous well-being. It began in August 2016 and runs over five years. The overall aim of the Laureate research project is to ensure that the most precious aspects of tangible heritage in need of safeguarding according to Indigenous people—in this case, rock art landscapes—are better conserved, appreciated, and understood for the benefit of contemporary communities and future generations.

FIGURE 5.
From an Indigenous perspective, ways to look after rock art include fire management, vegetation monitoring, and managing access.
This project has three key research questions:

1. Why are rock art complexes important for Indigenous people and especially for Indigenous well-being?
2. How can we better conserve and manage rock art landscapes for the benefit of future generations?
3. Why is there currently little rock art conservation concern in Australia compared to many other countries, and why do rock art sites continue to be threatened by economic activity (such as mining, agriculture, and infrastructure development) before their economic contribution and social values are evaluated?

Besides the present author, the Laureate project has a senior research fellow, two postdoctoral fellows, a research assistant, and two PhD students. Project team members are working in collaboration with Indigenous communities in various locations to better protect rock art within its wider cultural landscape, advance rock art conservation science, provide training, and develop sustainable models for cultural tourism and rock art. Already we are working with three Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, three in Queensland, one in New South Wales, one in Western Australia, and one in Sarawak, Malaysia. We are also advising government archaeologists involved with rock art conservation in Indonesia and co-led a workshop on rock art conservation and management in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, with Indonesian colleagues in March 2017. This workshop was organized around the four-pillar approach of Agnew et al. (2015) and was a successful first international test of the document.

As part of the Laureate project, rock art conservation/management plans will be underpinned by new theoretical perspectives, including reasons why some people vandalize or undervalue heritage. The project will generate new protocols and provide new interfaces between scientific, Indigenous, and public views of rock art, as well as foster and celebrate rock art assets as keystones of national identity.

A major outcome will be the creation of innovative and comprehensive web-based resources in order to assist with education and heritage management, as well as to help increase public and political awareness. Importantly, this will provide online access to important conservation and management resources for Indigenous communities across Australia and overseas. Other substantive outcomes include new national heritage strategies and sustainable conservation approaches that are informed by the unique nature of our rock art and its cultural settings. The project will incorporate Indigenous knowledge into rock art research, in turn creating new ways to engage the public.

Value will be delivered by guiding new government policies, developing new forms of tourism, minimizing risk to heritage when development occurs, and educating the general public about Aboriginal history and culture. Awareness of the importance of rock art among the general public should lead to a decrease in graffiti and vandalism. An informed and engaged public will also be concerned about the protection of sites facing damage from development.

Indigenous peoples will also benefit through capacity building and access to research and popular products that will assist with the development of Indigenous-led sustainable tourism.

Research results will be useful to museums, cultural centers, national parks, heritage organizations, and businesses engaged in cultural tourism and raising awareness about the importance of rock art.
Besides establishing a number of case studies with Indigenous communities, initial research in 2016/2017 has included a desktop study of rock art sites open to the public across Australia, the nature of access, and details of tour operators that take people to rock art sites. Interestingly, the study revealed that 25 percent (nineteen of seventy-six tour operators) are Indigenous owned/operated and others are in development. This research will be followed up with site visits and discussions with tour operators over the course of the project.

References